CHARLES IVES: FAITH HERO
Romans 12:1-8
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Charles Edward Ives is not an obvious choice for this intermittent series on "Faith Heroes", men and women who contributed to our faith and whose lives inspire. You have to know a good bit about Ives in order to appreciate his real worth. That situation was true throughout his life: few people recognized the importance of the person and the faith of Charles Ives. I want to begin by suggesting that he embodied the description of a Christian given by the Apostle Paul in today's New Testament lesson, in the twelfth chapter of Romans:

> "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.
> For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him. For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness."

Not conformed to this world, but transforming; not thinking of himself more highly than he ought to think, in fact extremely modest and retiring; having gifts that differ and fulfilling them - those are major themes in the life of Charles Ives.

He was born in 1874 in Danbury, Connecticut, the son of the town bandmaster. He composed music mostly from 1895 to 1915, when a disabling illness made further composing impossible. Yet he lived to be eighty years old, until 1954. During that long lifetime, his music was so ignored that Ives never heard a full performance of any of his major works. In 1947 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his Third Symphony which was composed in 1904 - the prize was forty-three years late, to give an idea how long Ives had to endure apparent failure.

In the early part of this century his music was completely unknown, and yet Ives was famous worldwide. Very early he realized his peculiar style of music would never support a family, so he turned to selling insurance. He was known as the first to approach insurance in order to help common people rather than primarily to guard the wealthy investors' assets. "Estate Planning" was his invention, the process of helping people plan for and meet their financial needs. Ives pioneered in training insurance agents to work with plain people, to develop and tailor financial security rather than merely hard-selling another policy. So well was his emphasis received that his agency, Ives and Myrick, became the largest life insurance brokerage in America, the most famous in the world.

During all the years of his insurance work, Ives was composing in his spare time, although very few people knew anything about that side of his life, not even most of those working closely with him in the insurance firm. One associate, who only later found out about Ives' musical radicalism, said of him that Ives was "no Bohemian, not avant-garde; in every way except one, he was the stereotype of a gentle, genial, generous upper-middle-class American".

Music interest had begun very early for young Charles Ives. His father, the bandmaster, was quite a musical innovator with very strong ideas. He trained the family to sing hymns in one key while he played the accompaniment in another, usually a halftone different - "to stretch their ears to hear new sounds," he used to say. In many ways young Charlie learned the "rules" of harmony by learning what it was like to break the rules, an important foundation for his later creativity.

Father George devised a system of twenty-four violin strings and another of water glasses filled to different levels - all so he could play quarter tones and not be bound to the halftone standard. On one occasion he arranged for two bands to march around the town park in opposite directions, playing different tunes in different tempos and different keys in order to see the effect when they came together at the far side of the park. When son Charles later recreated that effect in a major orchestral work, the conductor had to direct two beats simultaneously. Four bars with the left hand for half the orchestra equalled three bars with the right hand for the other half. One critic wrote that it was absolutely required that the conductor be an evangelical Christian: he couldn't let his right hand know what his left hand was doing. Now, balanced against this information, you need to know that the woman Ives married was named Harmony.

Throughout his life, Ives insisted that music must not just be pretty and sentimental He scorned the idea of what he called "men in skirts", composing or playing sugary tunes for sweet old ladies. During his teen years his interest was divided sharply between music and baseball - he was a natural athlete. A sweet old lady was once admiring one of his musical compositions, gushing over the young musical prodigy, and she asked, "What do you play, young man?" To which Charlie brusquely retorted, "Shortstop!" The conviction that his music must be full-blooded, not pale and anemic, and had to stand for something important - that was a lifelong concern.

Ives was deeply immersed in the church and in church music. At age fourteen he was the youngest regular church organist in the state. In his college and young adult years, he served as organist successively for Baptists, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and finally, Presbyterians - definitely an upward progression. His own faith was based on John Calvin and he regularly attended Congregational and Presbyterian churches all his life

But the summer camp meetings, the revivals which were a strong feature of late nineteenth century rural America, made a strong impression and remained with him. In his memos, Ives wrote: "I remember, when I was a boy - at the outdoor Camp Meeting services in Redding, all the farmers, their families and field hands, for miles around, would come afoot or in their farm wagons. I remember how the great waves of sound used to come through the trees - when things like Beulah Land...Nearer My God To Thee...In the Sweet Bye and Bye and the like were sung by thousands of 'let out' souls." Later, Ives described in theological terms the inspiration he found in Christian hymns. Writing about his own boyhood he said: "And as the hymn voices die away, there lies at the (young Ives') feet - not the world, but the figure of the Saviour - he sees an unfathomable courage - an immortality for the lowest - the vastness in humility, the kindness of the human heart, man's noblest strength - and he knows that God is nothing - nothing - but love." In his own composing Ives constantly incorporated those old hymn tunes that were so important to his life.

Ives always said he simply wrote the music he heard - the sounds of America and his hopes for America. People found his harmonies very strange and considered him eccentric, but he was following the Apostle Paul's advice to fulfill his own differing gifts. Far from being conformed to the world, Ives refused to compromise his integrity as a composer in order to achieve popular acceptance. There is tragedy in the lack of

recognition during his life, tragedy that he was forced to compose in a vacuum with no responsive audience at all, but he kept a sense of humor about it. Each time he completed a musical composition, a professional copyist had to be hired to put it into form for printing. But copyists often changed notes here and there to make harmonies work better, thinking Ives had made a mistake. So, in the margin of one of his manuscripts Ives wrote to the copyist: "Mr. Price: Please don't try to make things nice! All the wrong notes are right!"

How does one evaluate the genius of Charles Ives? Aaron Copeland compares Ives to the giants of American thought in mid-nineteenth century - Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau - and Copeland says that, not until more than a half-century later, "not until Charles Ives can we point to a comparable figure in the world of symphonic literature in America." Other authorities simply state flatly that Ives is America's greatest composer.

That is a musical judgment, of course. But I consider Ives one of the heroes of our faith for two other reasons. One is related to the quotation he especially loved from Thoreau: "The example of one sincere life...has benefitted society more than all the projects devised for its salvation." Ives lived by that creed. We have seen his integrity in music. We saw how his example turned the insurance business upside down as he worked to make insurnance serve common human needs. Ives believed that no one should have exorbitant wealth and so he lived very simply, seeing that the bulk of his income was given away. He wrote, "Does a person have a moral right to all the property he can acquire legally and honestly?" The example of his life is extremely strong. He did what he believed was right in music and in business even though it cost him dearly in terms of fame and wealth.

My second reason for preaching on Ives is that he was a national prophet, vitally concerned about the relation between America and God. Ives saw America as potentially a new Israel, God's new land. His music constantly reminds us that this nation is called by God to serve him faithfully. Picking up strains from the past, Ives speaks of a present faith and a future hope for our "one nation under God". He was already a veteran composer when at age eighteen Ives wrote Variations on America for organ. Betty has played the first three variations. Now listen to the fourth. It is a polonaise in a minor mode. I hear Ives speaking about America and telling us that there is a lot to be done. The music was written nearly ninety years ago, but its message is very up-to-date. Not everything is right; there are strains of discord and strife. But he pictures our nation on the move and there are promising hints at the end.

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Ives also had a third career: he was a well published essayist. His purpose was to encourage this nation to operate its life on the principles of Ralph Waldo Emerson. During the First World War and after, Ives repeatedly wrote to urge what he called "the United States of the World", a "People's World Union under whose constitution each country will be free to live its own life, no country shall try by force to capture another country." To bring about such a United States of the World he saw to be America's divine responsibility. Ives wrote five organ variations on the tune of America. When he was well into his seventies, organist Ives wrote to organist E. Power Biggs, "I enjoyed playing the fast pedal part in the last of the Variations on America almost as much as playing baseball." An indomitable character to the end!

I want to let Ives have the last word in this sermon, to have you listen to his fifth variation. I hear him picturing vividly the sound of a nation whose majesty and power come from faithful service. Ives is describing the fulfillment of America's destiny under God.

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